

“He’s (not) Coming South”: the invasion that wasn’t

Peter Stanley*

Bruce Stanmer, a member of the “Nackeroos”, the North Australia Observer Unit, describes an incident which occurred when he was patrolling with a VDC man north-east of Burketown early in 1943. In the distance he saw a group of white shapes. “God! Japanese bloody sailors!” he exclaimed. “Ahead of us we could see what looked like two dozen white uniforms and caps moving ... it turned out to be three brolgas”, magnified by the heat haze.¹ The vignette is highly pertinent to the question of the potential and actual threat of Japanese invasion of Australia in 1942.

Australians had feared the prospect of invasion since the earliest years of white settlement. In 1942 those long-standing apprehensions seemed to become a reality, or so it has seemed ever since. It’s common for Australians to assume that the invasion threat was real. To test the prevailing perception I circulated a questionnaire to about fifty people from several community groups. They included members of a local historical society, a University of the Third Age group and a conference of history teachers.

About two thirds agreed that Japan had planned to invade Australia in 1942. Around three quarters tended to agree that the Kokoda campaign had saved Australia from invasion and that the Brisbane Line strategy actually entailed abandoning northern Australia to the Japanese. Just about everyone – 95% – agreed that John Curtin was a great war leader.

So the popular perception is that Japan planned to invade Australia, would have had not the battle for Papua been won, and that the man responsible was the great war leader John Curtin. This paper takes issue with that perception. I’m arguing that there was in fact no invasion plan, that the Curtin government exaggerated the threat, and that the enduring consequence of its

* Principal Historian, Australian War Memorial, GPO Box 345, Canberra, ACT, 2601, peter.stanley@awm.gov.au. I’m grateful to my Research Centre colleague Mr Craig Tibbitts, whose 2001 University of Canberra research paper “Japan and Australia during the Second World War” provided a solid foundation for the interpretation I present in this paper.

¹ Richard Walker and Helen Walker, *Curtin’s Cowboys: Australia’s Secret Bush Commandos*, Sydney, 1989, p. 68. For an account of the Gulf Scare, see pp. 64–67



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

deception was to skew our understanding of the reality of the invasion crisis of 1942.²

* * *

The popular perception was founded in the long-held views of Australia's strategic planners. The Australian Chiefs of Staff had regarded the prospect of the loss of what they called the Malay Barrier as "the first stage in the Japanese plan for a major attack on Australia".³ With the actual fall of Malaya and Singapore and the breach of the Malay Barrier, that prediction appeared to be coming true.

And, indeed, the Japanese had been interested in Australia. Since the sixteenth century Japanese merchants and writers had been intrigued by the "South Seas" or *nan'yō*. Business interests developed early in the twentieth century and a rich scholarly literature grew reflecting Japanese interests in the South Seas, including Australia. However, there was no Japanese plan before 1942 to advance beyond the perimeter to be won in the initial conquest. Australia barely rated a mention in the 1941 conferences which planned Japan's strategy.⁴ In the euphoria of victory early in 1942 some visionary middle-ranking naval staff officers in Tokyo proposed that Japan should go further. In February and March they proposed that Australia should be invaded, in order to forestall it being used as a base for an Allied counter-offensive (which of course it became). The plans got no further than some acrimonious discussions. The Army dismissed the idea as "gibberish", knowing that troops sent further south would weaken Japan in China and in Manchuria against a Soviet threat. Not only did the Japanese army condemn the plan, but the Navy General Staff also deprecated it, unable to spare the million tons of shipping the invasion would have consumed. By mid-March

² This is hardly the first time that the subject has been discussed. Most popular authors accept the view that invasion was possible and that alarm was justified. John Robertson, in *Australia at War 1939-1945*, Chapter 12 "Invasion Threat" speculates on the question. Robertson argues that while no invasion was contemplated "the fortunes of the Pacific war were so finely balanced" early in 1942 that Curtin's "exaggerated" response to the threat (and especially his subservience to the United States) was understandable. David Horner, in *The Battles that Shaped Australia*, (Sydney, 1994) states categorically that "as a statement of fact it is not true" that an invasion was planned: p.161

³ "Defence of Australia", February 1941, A5954, 554/4, "Defence of Australia. Appreciation of Immediate Danger of Invasion in Force January 1942", NAA

⁴ Nobutaka Ike (ed.), *Japan's Decision for War: Records of the 1941 Policy Conferences*, Stanford, 1967



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

the proposal lapsed. Instead, the Japanese adopted a plan to isolate Australia, impeding communication between Australia and the United States by the occupation of islands to Australia's north-east (New Caledonia, Samoa and Fiji), though in the event these further operations were negated by the defeats of Coral Sea and Midway. This conclusion is supported by all the scholarship, notably the late and much missed Henry Frei, whose *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia* documents the debate and its conclusion from Japanese official and private sources.⁵

The seemingly imminent threat inspired at least one bizarre creative response. On 4 February a Mr Joseph Guerin of Murrumbidgee, Victoria, applied for copyright for a card game called "Invasion". It was played with cards, some representing offensive weapons (such as bombs) and others defensive measures (such as "blackout materials"). A "Mr Wisdom" card could be used to negate any offensive card, all except "The Gossiper" "against which", Mr Guerin warned, "there is no defence".⁶ It was a common view, one shared by the War Cabinet, which placed a great deal of emphasis on stimulating and sustaining national morale.

It needed to. The reaction of the Australian people to the crisis of early 1942 has been described as one of "panic".⁷ Certainly official and other historians have heightened the drama of the months in which invasion was regarded as possible. The official historian Paul Hasluck had some sport with the reactions of those "Up at Canberra, which appears to have been more badly scared than any other part of the continent". He described how public service typists were put to copying important documents so, if Canberra were bombed or occupied, "the Government could survive the loss of paper".⁸ Sarcasm comes easily in hindsight, but at the time the rhetoric and the actions of the Curtin government abetted and fuelled popular disquiet. Advertising and propaganda, not least though posters such as "He's Coming South" made the case graphically. (So damaging to morale did this appear that the Queensland government actually banned it.)⁹ Curtin's own Committee on National

⁵ Henry Frei, *Japan's Southward Advance and Australia: From the Sixteenth Century to World War II*, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 160-74. The argument has long been known in outline: see Fuchida Mitsuo & Okumiya Masatake, *Midway: the Battle that Doomed Japan*, London, 1957, pp. 71-73

⁶ A1336, 37147, Application for copyright by Joseph Guerin, NAA

⁷ Michael McKernan, *All-In!: Australia during the Second World War*, Melbourne, 1983, pp. 128-31

⁸ Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, Canberra, 1970, p. 125

⁹ Judy Macinoly, "'Wake up Australia!': Australia's home front propaganda during the second world war", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No. 1, October 1982, p. 20



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

Morale alerted him to the dangers of his alarmist policy and protested against the use of “fear posters” (such as “He’s Coming South” poster).¹⁰ This committee chaired by the mysterious Alf Conlon and including a dozen of the nation’s leading intellectuals (including Charles Bean) warned of the consequences of the government harping on the prospect of attack. The committee warned that the perception of “danger ... tended to thrust idealism into the background and replace it with a crude physical self-preservation”.¹¹



He's Coming South
AWM ARTV09225

Certainly the actions of the Curtin Cabinet display disquiet if not panic. Even before the fall of Malaya, New Britain or Singapore Curtin had appealed for help to Churchill and to Roosevelt. He claimed that “it is beyond our capacity to meet an attack of the weight the Japanese could launch” on Australia.¹² On the eve of the fall of Singapore Frank Forde, the Army Minister, urged Curtin to obtain a division from Canada and 50,000 US troops “in view of the

¹⁰ Prof. A. P. Elkin to Curtin, 5 March 1942, A1608, AK29/1/2, “War Records Committee on National Morale Main File”, NAA

¹¹ Report to Prime Minister, December 1942, A5954, 328/21, “Prime Minister’s Committee on National Morale”, NAA

¹² Curtin to Churchill, 21 January 1942, A5954, 554/4, “Defence of Australia. Appreciation of Immediate Danger of Invasion in Force January 1942”, NAA



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

likelihood of an attack upon Australia".¹³ By early March, Cabinet, on the advice of the Australian Chiefs of Staff, anticipated a landing around Darwin in early April and a landing on the east coast by May.¹⁴

Curtin's anxiety must have grown when in October 1942 he read a Chiefs-of-Staff file entitled "Japanese Plan for Invasion of Australia".¹⁵ The file does give a full outline, complete with a map annotated in Japanese, for a Japanese invasion of Australia via Western Australia with a diversionary attack around Darwin. The map was forwarded via the Australian legation in Chungking from Nationalist China's Director of Military Intelligence, Admiral H. C. Yang. But if John Curtin accepted it as genuine (as Paul Burns suggests in his book, *The Brisbane Line Controversy*) none of Curtin's military advisers agreed. Even the Chinese did not consider it genuine. In any case, the invasion was supposed to have been launched in May 1942, but the map was "discovered" only five months later. Curtin showed it to journalists in March 1943 to substantiate his contention that "Japanese strategy ... is being implemented".¹⁶ The map has since been used (notably in Michael Montgomery's book, *Who Sank the Sydney?*) as evidence of Japanese plans to invade. (The map is on display in the Research Centre with a careful caption: I hope that visitors read the caption.)

¹³ Forde to Curtin, 14 February 1942, A5954, 554/4, "Defence of Australia. Appreciation of Immediate Danger of Invasion in Force January 1942", NAA

¹⁴ A5954, 563/1, "Probable immediate Japanese moves in the proposed new ANZAC Area", 5 March 1942, NAA

¹⁵ Map, A7941, 46, "Japanese Plan for Invasion of Australia", NAA. Further correspondence is on AWM 123, 189, "Japanese invasion of Australia - Departmental working papers, cables, Japanese map, Oct 1942 - Feb 1943", AWM

¹⁶ Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall, *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin's War*, Canberra, 1997, p. 141



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/



Japanese 'invasion' map A7941, 46, 'Japanese Plan for Invasion of Australia', NAA

Curtin's apprehensions ought to have been greatly calmed by General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the South-West Pacific Area. MacArthur briefed the Advisory War Cabinet five days after arriving in Melbourne, in March. Its members may have been relieved to hear his opinion that "it is doubtful whether the Japanese would undertake an invasion of Australia ...", though they may have entertained misgivings over his reason "as the spoils here are not sufficient to warrant the risk". MacArthur consoled the Council by suggesting that the Japanese might "try to overrun Australia in order to demonstrate their superiority over the white races", but as a strategist he thought that an invasion would be "a blunder".¹⁷ In September 1942, though, Curtin was still pressing for an Allied force of 25 divisions for Australia's defence. Roosevelt, in a cablegram that month, reassured him that Americans "fully appreciate the anxiety which you must naturally feel" for Australia's security. Nevertheless, he had to stress that the forces then in Australia, including two American divisions and a large air corps element,

¹⁷ Advisory War Council, minute 869, 26 March 1942, A5954, 563/1, "Defence of Australia and ANZAC Area - Appreciation by Australian Chiefs of Staff", NAA



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

were “sufficient to defeat the present Japanese force in New Guinea and to provide for the security of Australia against an invasion”.¹⁸ The confidential “backroom briefings” Curtin gave journalists, documented by Fred Smith, suggest both his concern and his ignorance. On 21 September 1942, after complaining of the obduracy of Churchill and Roosevelt, Curtin told journalists that the Japanese could still “base on the Kimberleys and cross overland ... diagonally across in this direction”. This contradicted both the advice of his service advisers and geographical common sense.

By contrast, Winston Churchill, who had faced a more immediate threat of invasion for a year in 1940–41, took a more phlegmatic view of the likelihood of the Japanese attack. He consistently deprecated the likelihood, telling the House of Commons in January 1942 that the Japanese were more likely to devote their attention to making the most of their conquests rather than “undertaking a serious mass invasion of Australia”.¹⁹ His Chiefs of Staff consistently expressed the view that “a genuine invasion of Australia does not form part of the Japanese plans”.²⁰ The Curtin government, kept informed by both the Dominions Office and by its High Commissioner in London, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, was aware of this view throughout. The Australian Chiefs of Staff, asked to comment on this and other British appreciations, did not demur.²¹ Both Churchill and Roosevelt appear to have understood both that Australia was practically secure and that they had to deal with Curtin’s fretfulness rather than the strategic reality.

Not until early 1943 is there any indication that the Curtin cabinet accepted that the Japanese threat had diminished. The official poster “Ringed with menace!”, dating from about mid-1943 demonstrates how ludicrous the contention had become. In reality, Australia was spotted with inconvenience rather than ringed with menace. But Curtin refused to publicly concede the declining likelihood of actual invasion until June 1943. Not until 27 September 1943 – after the capture of Lae and as Australian divisions advanced into the

¹⁸ Roosevelt to Curtin, 16 September 1942, AWM 124, 4/106, “Chiefs of Staff – Global Strategy”, AWM

¹⁹ Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominions to Curtin, 27 January 1942, A5954, 563/1, “Defence of Australia and ANZAC Area – Appreciation by Australian Chiefs of Staff”, NAA

²⁰ Bruce to Curtin, 3 April 1942, A5954, 563/1, “Defence of Australia and ANZAC Area – Appreciation by Australian Chiefs of Staff”, NAA

²¹ For example, see UK Chiefs of Staff, “Appreciation of Situation in Far East”, March 1942, on which the Australian counterparts commented on 14 March, in which they remark only on the use of British warships in a proposed (but abortive) Anglo-American fleet: AWM 123, 286, “Appreciation by United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff”, AWM



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

Markham valley and onto the Huon Peninsula – do the Cabinet minutes at last record simply “the danger of invasion, he said, had passed”.²² But even as he confirmed in an off-the-record briefing in March 1944 that “there would now never be any danger to the eastern side of Australia”, he was still raising the possibility of Japanese attacks on Darwin and Western Australia, his home state.²³



Ringed with Menace
AWM ARTV09061

What explains Curtin’s anxiety? Australian and Allied leaders in Australia knew of the Japanese decision not to invade within a month of the debates between staff officers in Tokyo in March 1942. In early April “Magic” intercepts reached Australia which confirmed that no invasion was contemplated.²⁴ An actual danger of invasion had never existed and the likelihood diminished through 1942 as Allied victories eroded Japan’s offensive capability. Curtin was told as much by London and Washington, and MacArthur, Curtin’s principal strategic adviser, consistently advised that it was improbable. Why did Curtin continue to bang the invasion drum? Glyn

²² Cabinet minutes, 27 September 1943, A2703, Volume IA, “Index to 1941–1943 Full Cabinet Minutes”, NAA

²³ Clem Lloyd and Richard Hall, *Backroom Briefings: John Curtin’s War*, Canberra, 1997, p. 202

²⁴ Glyn Harper, “Threat perception and politics: the deployment of Australian and New Zealand ground forces in the Second World War”, *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No. 20, April 1992, p. 39. The archival evidence is cited in footnote 20: Combined Operations Intelligence Centre minute, 11 April 1942, [NAA] MP1587; 218s SRs 575 ‘Magic summary’, 18 April 1942, RG257, US National Archives and Records Administration



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

Harper has suggested that Curtin's kept up the pretence of an invasion threat for electoral advantage in 1943.²⁵ Other answers may be that by so loudly proclaiming the danger Curtin could kill two birds with one stone. First, he could mobilise the Australian people, whose commitment to the sacrifices necessary for victory so often was less passionate than his own. Second, his advocacy of a possibility known by Axis to be false supported the deception that the Allies had broken key enemy codes. Had Curtin admitted the impossibility of invasion sooner Axis powers may have suspected how he could have known.

This much is logical. And yet a deeper answer seems to lurk in Curtin's psyche. Curtin felt the burden of responsibility of his office so gravely that it contributed to his death in 1945. His rejection of advice that invasion was not going to occur, his repeated appeals for reinforcements in secret communications, and his privately dwelling on the prospect suggest that he was unable to accept the reality. David Day, in his recent sympathetic biography of Curtin, argues that "much of the anxiety and bitterness" which stemmed from Curtin's fruitless appeals for forces for Australia's defence to Roosevelt and Churchill could have been avoided had they taken Curtin and MacArthur into their confidence.²⁶ Certainly Churchill and Roosevelt's desire to divert the 7th Division convoy to Burma soured relations, and not until May 1942 did they tell Curtin of their decision to "Beat Hitler First". But it would seem rather that it was Curtin's refusal to accept the strategic evaluations of London and Washington that caused his unease. In the event, Churchill and Roosevelt were right and Curtin was wrong. He has been represented as the "Saviour of Australia".²⁷ However much Australia's contribution stemmed from his passionate commitment to victory, to his organisational skills and his personal example as an inspiring leader, Curtin did not save Australia from any real threat. Instead, one of the lasting legacies of his whipping up of the fear of invasion fear has been a persistent heritage of bogus invasion stories.

* * *

²⁵ Glyn Harper, "Threat perception and politics: the deployment of Australian and New Zealand ground forces in the Second World War", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No. 20, April 1992, p. 40

²⁶ David Day, *John Curtin: a Life*, Melbourne, 1999, p. 485

²⁷ Norman Lee, *John Curtin: Saviour of Australia*, Melbourne, 1983



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

Virtually all books on Australia in the Second World War refer to the prospect of “attack and even invasion”, as the text in the Memorial’s Second World War gallery puts it. Few make clear that the prospect was remote. As a consequence the invasion myth has a life of its own. There are websites devoted to the subject, most notably Peter Dunn’s “Japsland” site. These stories provide a bizarre catalogue of imaginary, retrospective foreboding. Japsland refers to:

- Sky sign found and rumbling noises from Doubtful Bay ... Western Australian War
- Japanese landing at Rutland Plains Station
- Japanese airfield near Blue Mud Bay in Arnhem Land
- Japanese land on south east shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria in April 1943
- Possible Japanese landing on Mornington Island ... in January 1944
- Japanese landing party ambushed in The Kimberley
- Did the Japanese land at Jurien Bay, WA?
- Japanese landing at Yarrabah Aboriginal Mission ... date unknown
- Japanese landing party at Rough Range near Exmouth Gulf
- 100 Japanese land north of Farnborough just north of Yeppoon (which referred to a further ten alleged landings)
- Thompson's Point POW camp for Japanese prisoners near Rockhampton

What is the evidence for these reports? Invariably it is anecdotal, hearsay and unsubstantiated. For example:

there was a secret Japanese Prisoner of War Camp located in the mangroves at Thompson's Point ... to the south east of Rockhampton. There was breakout of some Japanese prisoners on one occasion and tow [sic] Japanese prisoners were shot and killed. ... Their grave sites are unmarked but a number of local residents are still familiar with the exact location of these graves.²⁸

The page on the alleged Japanese submarine refuelling base at Princess Charlotte Bay in North Queensland contains not a single scrap of evidence. The report of Japanese submarine crews landing at Cape Upstart (to enjoy barbecues and share whiskey with the locals) was “common knowledge” in the district. Like the “Gulf Scare” of April 1943 (which had units north-west Queensland searching for non-existent invaders) almost all of these incursions

²⁸ <http://home.st.net.au/~dunn/japsland/japsland.htm>; “Thompson’s Point POW camp”



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

were imaginary.²⁹ Indeed, as Bruce Stanmer's encounter with the brologas suggests, some were illusory.

In fact, only one of these alleged incidents is supported by evidence. In January 1944 a small Japanese party sailed from Koepang to travel to Admiralty Gulf, in north-west Western Australia. Nine Japanese took ten Timorese youths with them for a four-day visit. They explored the area, shot an hour of 8-mm film and returned with some rock souvenirs. Nothing came of the mission, which was undetected by Australian forces. That small, innocuous, invisible exploring party, on a short tip-and-run trip to the nearest part of the Australian continent, represents the only Japanese landing on the Australian continent supported by the evidence.³⁰

The popular perception, however, survives, buttressed by a host of supposed evidence. Japanese maps of Australia, for example, are represented as evidence that invasion plans existed. That's nonsense: Australian headquarters held maps of New Zealand but that doesn't by itself signify that warships were going to appear off Wellington or Waikickamoocow. Then there is the so-called "invasion" or "occupation" money. As the "Japsland" website puts it: "The Japanese Government planned to take over Australia during World War 2. They were so confident that they had gone to the extent of producing their own version of currency to be used in Australia."³¹ The Japanese did indeed produce bank notes in guilders or dollars for use in the occupied Indies and Malaya. They also produced four denominations of notes in Australian pounds; but for use in occupied British Oceania and Papua New Guinea. Australian servicemen in New Guinea and the islands brought them home in large amounts. These notes do not, of course, constitute evidence of an intention to invade Australia.³²

Likewise, the Brisbane Line myth has spawned a range of sites identified as part of what was always an imaginary line.³³ Tank obstacles and even

²⁹ Walker and Walker, *Curtin's Cowboys*, pp. 64–67

³⁰ The Mizuno Sushiko mission is discussed in Henry Frei, *Japan's Southward Advance to Australia*, pp. 173–74 and Robert Piper, *The Hidden Chapters: Untold Stories of Australians at War in the Pacific*, Carlton, 1995, Chapter 15.

³¹ <http://home.st.net.au/~dunn/japsland/japsland.htm>; "Japanese invasion money". By the site's exact count 2,219 people have been misinformed by this since June 2000.

³² C. Frederick Schwan and others, *World War II Military Currency*, Port Clinton, 1980, p. 153

³³ Paul Burns's *The Brisbane Line Controversy: Political Opportunism versus National Security 1942–45*, Sydney, 1998 established beyond any doubt that there was no Brisbane Line and



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

innocent earthworks are pointed out and even labelled as parts of “the Brisbane Line”. Near Tenterfield in northern New South Wales a large sign on a concrete bank informs observers that “This is the area of the Brisbane Line which was to be the second line of defence if the northern part of Australia fell into enemy hands.”³⁴ Similarly, the attacks on Darwin and Sydney Harbour are represented as evidence of an invasion threat when in fact they relate to counter-measures for the occupation of Timor and diversionary attacks for Midway respectively. I recently heard a story that caches of “Japanese gold” in Java were hoarded to pay for an invasion of Australia. Again, the records are nowhere to be found.

Queensland is, not surprisingly, the home of invasion furrphies. Every few months the Memorial’s Military History Section is asked to comment on a report or a rumour. We recently heard of the alleged massacre of a party of 100 Japanese marines at the mouth of the Fitzroy River, at the hands of American troops and a Volunteer Defence Corps unit. An even more fantastic story comes from nearby Yeppoon in *The Long Island Massacre*. It is alleged that 160 marines were massacred by another VDC party. This allegation is part of an elaborate story which has Frank Forde collaborating with the Vatican to invite the Japanese to seize northern Queensland. The evidence for this story is elusive. The author claims that “a purposeful program of systematic obliteration has been carried out to otherwise conceal the only remaining ‘incriminating’ *wartime invasion-site connections* evidence from a ‘unsuspecting’ public gaze” [sic].³⁵ Naturally.

Why these stories persist, and why Australians believe, against all the evidence, that they faced an actual threat, present a profound conundrum. It seems that Australians want to believe that they faced an actual (rather than a potential) invasion. They almost *want* to believe that Australia faced this danger, a real rather than a remote threat. They prefer to justify Australia’s self-centred approach to the war from late 1941 by reference to a threat which did not exist, was known not to exist and which has been exaggerated. Perhaps just as Gallipoli fosters the idea that Australia was born as a nation on the cliffs of ANZAC Cove, so the invasion myth of 1942 testifies to the value of what was saved. But he wasn’t coming south: he was never coming

confirms that it was the product of an internal ALP stoush. Sadly, Burns’s book has not overturned a popular myth.

³⁴ Photographs and associated cutting from a local newspaper, dated 1992, courtesy of Mrs Joan Whitaker, one of the Memorial’s Voluntary Guides.

³⁵ Ron Gallagher, *The Long Island Massacre*, Yeppoon, 2000, p. 1



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

south. John Curtin knew as much by the middle of 1942. His insistence that he was has skewed our understanding of the impact of the Japanese threat on Australian history. It is time that Australians stopped kidding themselves that their country faced an actual invasion threat and looked seriously at their role in the Allied war effort.

* * *

This paper was presented at the Memorial's 'Remembering 1942' conference on 31 May. On 1 June the *Daily Telegraph* devoted five pages of its "Inside Edition" supplement to a feature variously headlined "Imagine the Unthinkable", "Rising Sun over Sydney" and "Was invasion closer than we feared?"³⁶ These pages were based on "painstaking research" conducted by "history enthusiasts" Warren Brown and John Collins, based on their yet-to-be published fictional history *Strike South*. Accompanied by impressions by Warren Brown of Zeros over the harbour, bombs exploding beside the Town Hall and Japanese soldiers boarding a Bondi tram, the feature presented a fictional speculation of a Japanese invasion. It posited an invasion around Darwin in early July and a Japanese force heading southwards toward Central Australia. (A further drawing showed Japanese soldiers plodding through the "dead heart" and the accompanying text described a "scorched earth" strategy defeating this advance towards Adelaide. Why Adelaide was not explained.) The feature was accompanied by a map of the landings around Botany Bay, Narrabeen and Pittwater captioned in minute type "This graphic illustrates a fictional attack on Sydney".

This feature raises questions about what Australians know and believe about this aspect of their history and about a newspaper's responsibility toward informing or misinforming its readers. "Alternative" or "counterfactual" history is increasingly accepted as an accepted technique, one that can produce useful questions or insights. (I have used the method myself, most recently several weeks before, in a conference workshop debating its application to secondary history teaching.) At the same time, in the light of the misconceptions which most Australians evidently entertain over the likelihood of invasion in 1942, publishing such a feature so prominently (beginning with the newspaper's cover) and without any historical counterweight was surely reprehensible. One letter was later published in the *Telegraph*. On 4 June a Geoff Ruxton of Kogarah wrote to say that he was

³⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 1 June 2002, pp. 1, 31-35



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/

“simply appalled” at the feature, which was “an insult to anyone’s intelligence”. Perhaps because the feature confirmed prevailing preconceptions no controversy ensued.

The *Daily Telegraph* had in fact asked the Memorial’s historians (myself and Dr Robert Nichols) for a thousand words of historical background on the submarine raid and the invasion threat. Between 30 May, when we were asked, and 1 June the *Telegraph* found itself short of space and the thousand words Robert and I had written were dropped. As a result, tens of thousands of readers were left with a vivid impression that invasion could have been feasible but without any historically-based interpretation putting a countervailing or contextual view.

Late in February 1942, in the aftermath of the fall of Singapore and as what Curtin called “the battle for Australia” opened, the *Daily Telegraph* published the results of a survey a survey of its readers’ opinions. Fifty-four per cent believed that Australia would be invaded: a smaller proportion than those who appear to agree today.³⁷ If my informal survey has any validity, is it any wonder that most Australians still believe, in the face of all the evidence, that He was indeed Coming South in 1942?

³⁷ McKernan, *All-in*, p. 130



Australian War Memorial

Remembering 1942 history conference
www.awm.gov.au/events/conference/